



# EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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## A New Approach to PD—and Growing Leaders

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**By making PD happen in small teams that together tackle teachers' "defining work," this school grows instructional leaders.**

Let's acknowledge that the most common strategies to improve teaching and generate new instructional leaders in schools aren't working.

It's common for schools to offer various professional development activities—teacher workshops, observation and feedback cycles, training sessions, department or grade-level meetings, and data meetings. Many of these meetings and activities are billed as "collaborative." To add gravitas, they're given name-like inquiry teams, critical friends groups, and instructional rounds. School leaders then devote precious resources in hopes of giving these activities more power to spur teacher growth. They train facilitators, implement protocol, lengthen meeting duration and frequency, and even assign participants pre- and post-work.

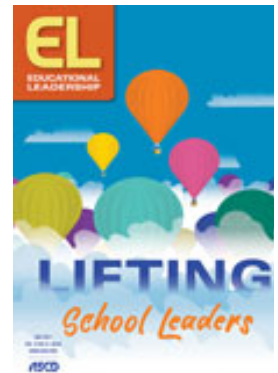
Yet these efforts often fail to yield the growth necessary to produce great teachers and instructional leaders. That's because, despite their collaborative-sounding names, they aren't truly collaborative.

## What "Working Collaboratively" Really Means

In our field, the term *collaborative* has almost come to be used whenever two or more people meet. However, true collaboration—the kind that makes adults significantly better at their jobs—happens only when professionals collaborate daily on the *defining work* of their profession, striving collectively to make that work the best it can be. And it happens only under the direct leadership of someone who's already superb at this defining work.

For instance, lawyers work together daily on the same cases. They work hard to prep a case and argue it as a team; their work is led by a senior partner who is already skilled in this particular area of the law. A real estate lawyer doesn't have his learning organized and led by a personal injury lawyer. Teams of doctors consult daily on the same patients. They decide on a plan for treatment and execute it, led by a doctor who's expert in this area of medicine. Again, a thoracic surgeon doesn't have her learning organized by a brain surgeon.

The defining work of the legal team is the case that needs to be won. The defining work of the medical team is the health of the patient. Analogous defining work exists for engineers, architects, and so on. In all these fields, the defining work is also the work on which the professionals collaborate. Although many fields (like medicine and social work) require workers to undertake additional continuing education to maintain their credentials, their basic professional learning comes through doing quality work together. Professionals in other fields are rarely required



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to attend training sessions at the end of their workday or do lots of extra "professional development" activities with coworkers.

In our opinion, the defining piece of work in the education field is the superb lesson plan and its well-executed delivery. Everything else is secondary. It's striking and disturbing, then, that the defining piece of our craft is missing from traditional professional development. Instead, teachers work on a wholly distinct and relatively marginal set of tasks, such as analyzing data, creating instructional rubrics, and aligning their courses. Teachers attend workshops on how to write better lessons—but they don't actually write them during the workshops. They may meet with an administrator who rates a previous lesson—but that same administrator doesn't help them practice tomorrow's lesson. The defining work on lessons—the work that would also develop many teachers' instructional leadership skills—is done later, in isolation.

In our experience, teachers want professional development that helps them write, practice, and deliver more engaging lessons and implement effective classroom routines. If you ask new or developing teachers what their biggest concern is, the answer you'll most commonly hear is that they're worried their upcoming lessons aren't good enough. They want to talk through their next few lessons and get ideas to improve them. What they don't want—or need—are professional development meetings that create new work. They want help with the defining work.

## Why It's Not Happening

Consider the professional development opportunities mentioned earlier. Often educators working together at those meetings don't share the same piece of the defining work—which means they can't possibly work on it together. For instance, if a 7th grade math teacher is paired with an 8th grade English teacher at an after-school workshop on effective questioning techniques, whose lesson do they work on? This can't be real collaboration. Or if, in a history department meeting, the 9th grade world history teacher works with the 11th grade U.S. history teacher, their work product cannot be a lesson. If a science teacher's supervisor observes part of a lesson and provides a recommendation, this is critique, not collaboration. The supervisor might advise more open-ended questioning, but the teacher may already know that her questioning was weak. The problem is that she might not know how to come up with better questions for her next few lessons. Talking about questioning won't fix this. Actually writing better questions under the guidance of an expert would.

In all these cases, the defining work can't be done by the assembled "collaborators." But some work needs to happen at these meetings. Enter: spreadsheets of data, student and teacher rubrics, and standards to "unpack." Enter: protocol-bound meetings that generate even more work for teachers. Enter: generalized discussions about depth-of-knowledge or questioning techniques. In such sessions, leaders define, rate, or otherwise talk about quality instruction rather than *creating* quality instruction. These efforts crowd out the precious little time we have for the difficult and most important effort, the work educators most need to collaborate on.

## Our Alternative

We believe the work of professional development should be the same work teachers typically do during their pre periods and at home every night—the work most teachers do entirely alone. So at the Urban Assembly School for Applied Math and Science (AMS), a public school in the Bronx, New York, serving grades 6–12, we make sure that's the case. Our Artisan Teaching Model ensures true teacher collaboration and develops instructional leadership. We've essentially eliminated traditional professional development and repurposed that time for teachers to collaborate daily in artisan teams. These teams are not PLCs or study groups. Each consists of three to five colleagues who teach the same subject at the same grade level to similar groups of students. Effective collaboration necessitates that *only* these teachers attend—because only this group shares the same defining work.

For instance, our three 7th grade math teachers (the "7th grade math team"), led by a Team Leader, work together to write common learning objectives, weekly lessons, and assessments and to coordinate grading policies. Together this team practices delivering lessons, observes in one another's classrooms, shares feedback, and revises their lessons. The result is shared input and accountability for the success of all students.

The defining work of these teachers is to teach 7th grade math—so the work of their team is *teaching 7th grade math*. Within the team is where these teachers' real professional development happens, and where some of them will build skills for instructional leadership.

For this kind of collaboration to successfully drive improvement, one of the collaborators needs to be excellent at the defining work. This is crucial to any artisan-apprentice relationship and it's how expertise is developed in other fields. A new lawyer works on the defining work—writing court briefs, for example—and meets with a senior attorney to get critical feedback over and over until the work is good enough. We wouldn't expect lawyers to get better at their work without this opportunity to apprentice with someone who's highly skilled, just as we wouldn't pair a rookie police officer with another rookie to learn the job.

In our model, each small team is led by a Team Leader—a standout teacher at this grade level and subject, someone who consistently creates and delivers well-designed lessons that inspire and challenge students of all levels and backgrounds. This Team Leader is the *artisan* and has a reduced teaching load to free time for providing guidance. Not every teacher becomes a Team Leader. Although each educator who will serve as a Team Leader is in final analysis, chosen by school administrators, the main way leaders emerge is organically. The skills a Team Leader needs to have are communicated to everyone from their first year at AMS.

The team structure itself provides countless hours of authentic collaboration between teachers new to the school, their colleagues, and Team Leaders. During these first few years of collaboration, the intensive daily work identifies some teachers who deeply understand the goals of the collaborative process—and who relish the opportunity to push their colleagues (and themselves) to improve instruction every day. These are the teachers who take ownership of the successes or failures of each day's work and seek out opportunities for reflection. As school administrators identify such teachers, they encourage those teachers gradually to take on larger roles—leading meetings, visiting classrooms to provide feedback, and engaging in other leadership tasks, and the administrators provide feedback on this new work. During this process, teachers are simultaneously developing their own teaching and leadership skills, and after three (or more) years of development, they can apply to become a Team Leader.

By the time teachers apply to become Team Leaders, the administration has had ample opportunity to assess the strengths in four key areas: relevant content knowledge, pedagogy, youth development, and adult development. When the administration is confident that the teacher has demonstrated expertise in all four areas, they will formally name the teacher as a Team Leader.<sup>1</sup>

## Thriving Teachers and Students

The Artisan Teaching Model's strict definition of *collaboration* allows school leaders to improve teachers' instructional skills much more effectively than conventional professional development. Adults learn more and develop a deeper understanding of a complex profession when they're supported in apprenticeship-based systems. It's more effective for a teacher to learn new strategies from an expert teammate while writing real lesson plans than to attend workshops on how to write lesson plans, and it's more effective for her to be observed by teammates as she teaches a shared lesson than to receive feedback from an administrator visiting all classes once a month.

At AMS, teammates push one another to design lessons that are truly engaging. A 7th grade math teacher, Ms. Sanders, described a team meeting like this:

"Why would a 7th grader care about this?" said my Team Leader, Ms. Rodriguez. Mr. Johnson, who also teaches two sections of 7th grade math, and I were discussing a lesson I wrote for an upcoming unit. ... Ms. Rodriguez encouraged me to talk through the lesson, explaining "where and why a 7th grader would really get excited." I explained that kids would solve for different side lengths, require multistep solutions, and include decimals and fractions. Ms. Rodriguez liked these points, but said that she doubted whether 12-year-olds would do any of the problems I gave them unless they were told they had to.

After this discussion, Ms. Sanders came up with scenarios that tapped the relevant math skills and would ignite middle schoolers' interest—building a slip-and-slide from a second floor window to a backyard and building a skateboard ramp—and worked these into the lesson.

It's also more effective for a team to analyze student work from a common assignment than to attend schoolwide data-analysis meetings. Ms. Sanders recalled another meeting at which her team looked at students' answers from a common exam. It became clear that Mr. Johnson's students had done better than hers, although all teachers used the same lesson plans. In talking with him, she discovered he had made different choices in lesson delivery and stressed different things. "Each set of student answers became another opportunity for me to learn," she noted.

As the first and second principals of AMS, we've refined this teaching model at our school over 13 years. We've found that this work of daily collaborative lesson planning merges all the aspects of professional development in one comprehensive system. We steer our school community away from traditional activities like training sessions and teacher rating systems because they simply aren't needed, and they distract us. Teachers—and administrators—work too hard. There simply isn't time for so many meetings.

We believe our system of supporting teachers' growth is one reason AMS students consistently show high student achievement. Almost 90 percent of our students receive free or reduced-price lunch and 10 percent are English language learners. Yet we have a 90 percent on-time graduation rate, and more than 80 percent of our graduates enroll in college compared with approximately 50 percent of U.S. high school grads. We've seen other benefits from using the Artisan model, including a consistent vision of great instruction across the school and a schoolwide curriculum that's written, shared, and passed along from teacher to teacher.

## Transforming the Leader's Role

The Artisan Teaching Model transforms the role of school leaders. In most schools, leaders support far too many teachers at one time—providing workshops for 20 or even 50 teachers once a week or observing every teacher once a month. These structures tend to systematize superficial support. School leaders know this feeling all too well: *We have so much work to do, spread between so many teachers.* We lead workshops and offer observation feedback knowing that our advice won't substantially change a teacher's practice unless we provide the support that teacher deserves—by meeting with him or her much more often to discuss, model, and collaborate.

Artisan teams solve that problem. A larger pool of instructional leaders focuses on the defining work with a few teachers daily. Teachers benefit from real support, and they learn from their first day on the job what instructional leadership looks like. They begin to learn how to mentor as they are being mentored. This system provides more effective support for teachers while providing a career path for teachers interested in leadership. We've found that our collaborative teams allow the best teachers to flourish quickly and emerge as new voices of leadership, resulting in a growing cadre of Team Leaders.

## Back to Excitement!

School leadership is liberating and exciting when leaders have an opportunity to work on what we care about most—teaching! Each of us remembers vividly the greatest lessons we ever taught. We never forget the day our students raced around the room to measure all the circles to figure out the pattern that explains  $\pi$ . Or when students passionately reenacted a debate between W. E. B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey.

Professional development sessions should be places where school leaders share the work of planning those rich, engaging activities, contributing their expertise to *precisely* the work teachers do every day. We should be teaching new teachers how to deliver the same lessons that worked so well in our own classrooms, and brainstorming with those teachers as they share their own ideas to create the same type of learning.

The excitement teachers feel discussing successful lessons is lost in typical professional development workshops, data sessions, and evaluation meetings. But it's in full view when a small team shapes lessons together every day.

*Author's note:* All teachers' names are pseudonyms.

## Readers' Stories

### Invited into Experiences

In my first years of teaching, it wasn't uncommon for me to find myself in rooms I didn't think I had any business being in. I served on a strategic planning committee for the district, regularly represented my grade level at exclusive professional development opportunities, and even served as teacher representative on a principal interview panel. My résumé was filled with unique, diverse experiences, all thanks to the unwavering faith of my first principal, Dr. Linda Hitchcock. Dr. Hitchcock personally oversaw my new teacher induction, spending hours explaining the intricacies of Understanding by Design. She helped me design an intervention plan for my most challenging student, hours after school had ended. She taught me what it truly means to be a mentor, including the time, attention, and conviction that it takes. In the years since, I try to find opportunities to "Dr. Hitchcock" my own young colleagues in whom I see potential. I still find myself in rooms I have no business being in, but now I know I can succeed because my mentor showed me who I am not yet, but will be.

—Meghan Raftery, school/community partnerships coordinator, Virginia Beach City Public Schools, Virginia Beach, Virginia

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> For a more complete description of our structure of teacher leadership, see *The Artisan Teaching Model for Instructional Leadership* (ASCD, 2016).

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## KEYWORDS

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